

# Southwest Native Herbs

Any plant that is useful in some manner - for culinary, cosmetic, craft, dye, medicinal or other purposes - can be considered an herb. Some of the following plants are native to Arizona, others are found in various areas of the southwest. A range of plants is covered, including small annuals and perennials, as well as larger shrubs, trees, vines, and succulents. These herbs make wonderful landscape plants, in addition to their utilitarian attributes. Try some in your yard! This list is a small taste of our southwest herbs - there are many more exciting plants out there!

## Herbal Trees

*Chilopsis linearis* - Desert-willow

Bignoniaceae - Bignonia family

- native to washes between 1,500 and 5,500' throughout the southwest U. S. and northern Mexico
- grows 20-25' tall and wide; has pink and lavender flowers through warm season
- grows in most soils with decent drainage, in full sun; winter deciduous
- antiseptic and antifungal, used to clean wounds, for coughs and digestive problems caused by use of antibiotics; branches used for construction; dried flowers make a pleasant, fruity-flavored tea (do not use during pregnancy); attracts hummingbirds

## Herbal Shrubs

*Aloysia wrightii* (*Lippia wrightii*) - Oreganillo, Wright's Bee Brush

Verbenaceae - Vervain family

- native to rocky, gravelly slopes, canyons, washes and grasslands from southeastern California and southern Nevada to western Texas and into Mexico, at elevations from 1,500 to 6,500'
- reaches 3-6' tall and wide; has tiny white flowers in long, dense spikes, blooming predominantly in spring (March - May) and late summer (July - October)
- grow in full, partial or filtered sun; winter deciduous, and possibly drought deciduous without supplemental water (can decrease water in late spring after major growth)
- makes a relaxing, soothing, calming tea, also a digestive aid (kind of bland and bitter for cooking); attracts honeybees and butterflies

*Condea emoryi* (*Hyptis emoryi*) - Desert-lavender

Lamiaceae - Mint family

- native to dry rocky slopes, washes and canyons up to 4,000', from southern California and Nevada to New Mexico, south into Baja California and Sonora, Mexico
- grows 5-10' tall, 5-8' wide; has tiny lavender-blue flowers mainly in spring and fall, sporadically the rest of the year; foliage has a wonderful light lavender scent
- plant in full sun and well-drained soil; drought deciduous without supplemental water, and a little frost sensitive
- flowers or leaves used to make a weak tea (in hot water for a short time gives a minty flavor) that is good for the stomach and throat and smells wonderful; seeds were used as a food; flowers attract hummingbirds, butterflies, and native bees

*Encelia farinosa* - Brittlebush, Incienso

Asteraceae - Sunflower family

- native to rocky slopes and sandy or gravelly soils below 3,000', from southern California and Baja California, Mexico to western and southern Arizona and Mexico

- grows to 4' tall and wide; with golden daisy-like flowers above the shrubs mainly from March to May, also October to January with rains
- grow in well draining soil and full sun
- flower tea helps soothe stomach; sap used as a glue; dried sap relieves gum and tooth pain and has been used as gum and incense; flowers attract butterflies

***Ephedra nevadensis, E. viridis*** - Mormon-tea, Joint-fir

Ephedraceae - Joint-fir family

- various species native to southwest and Mexico on rocky hillsides, mesas and sandy plains, from 1,000 to 7,000'
- grow 3-6' tall, 3-8' wide; male and female cones on separate plants in spring
- grow in well-drained soil in full sun
- stems used in tea by early Mormons; used for kidney problems, as diuretic, and to heal sores; used to make dyes

***Eriogonum fasciculatum*** - Flattop Buckwheat

Polygonaceae - Buckwheat family

- native to dry rocky slopes from 1,000 to 4,500', from southeastern California and Baja California, Mexico, to southern Nevada, southwestern Utah and Arizona
- grows to 2' tall, 2-3' wide; with clusters of small white to pink flowers predominantly in spring, sporadically through November
- grow in well draining soil in full sun
- used as an external antiseptic wash, a gargle for sore throats; seed was used as a food; attracts butterflies

***Gutierrezia sarothrae*** - Broom Snakeweed

Asteraceae - Sunflower family

- native to dry plains and slopes from 1,500 to 7,000', throughout the west and into Mexico
- grows to 2' tall and wide; covered with tiny yellow flowers in spring and fall
- grow in full sun, in just about any soil
- Native Americans used leaves for stomachaches and gastric disorders, ant, bee and wasp stings and snake bites to reduce swelling; can be used as pain relieving soak for sore muscles after a hard day of gardening; attracts butterflies

***Larrea tridentata*** - Creosote Bush

Zygophyllaceae - Caltrop family

- native to dry plains, mesas and slopes with well draining soil, from southeastern California to western Texas, south to Baja California and main Mexico, below 5,000'
- grows to 6' tall, 8' wide (most typically); with fragrant foliage and a heavy bloom of yellow flowers in spring (sporadically throughout remainder of year)
- grow in well draining soil in full sun; do not overwater when trying to establish plant!
- this plant has numerous medicinal qualities; the resin was used as a glue by Natives; used for ceremonial purposes by some Native Americans; flowers attract native bees

***Leucophyllum frutescens*** - Texas Ranger, Texas-sage, Cenizo

Scrophulariaceae - Figwort family

- native to southwestern Texas and southeastern New Mexico and northeastern Mexico on rocky hillsides, in washes and brushlands from 1,000 to 4,500' elevation

- grows to 6' tall, 6-8' wide; during warm season has outbursts of lavender colored blooms when the humidity is high or with a good rain
- plant in full sun, will grow in variable well-draining soils
- the flowers and leaves make a pleasant tasting tea, have also been used for cold and flu

***Lippia graveolens*** - Mexican-oregano

Verbenaceae - Vervain family

- native to dry rocky slopes - south Texas into Mexico
- grows 4-6' tall and wide, with tiny white honey-scented flowers through the summer
- grow in well draining soil in full sun; cold deciduous
- spicy robust oregano flavor for cooking, dries well; attracts honeybees

***Poliomintha incana*** - Hoary Rosemarymint

Lamiaceae - Mint family

- native to sandy or gypsum slopes and desert flats at elevations of 3,500 to 6,000', from southeastern California, southern Utah and northern Arizona to western Texas and into Sonora and Chihuahua, Mexico
- grows 3-4' tall, 4-6' wide; has small lavender speckled flowers that bloom from March to August
- plant in well-drained soil in full sun
- both flowers and foliage have intense mint flavor; traditionally used by Natives as greens or seasoning, and with medicinal plants to mask unpleasant tastes; flowers visited by hummingbirds and butterflies

***Poliomintha maderensis*** - Rosemarymint, Mexican-oregano

Lamiaceae - Mint family

- native to Mexico
- grows 3-4' tall and wide; blooms all summer with long tubular rosy-lavender flowers
- provide a well-drained slightly organic soil, with filtered sunlight in low desert, or full sun in other areas
- the leaves have a peppery oregano flavor, good with beans, stews, soups, etc.; sprinkle flowers in salads; blooms attract hummingbirds

***Rhus microphylla*** - Desert Sumac, Littleleaf Sumac

Anacardiaceae - Sumac family

- native to desert flats, along washes, and rocky hillsides of Arizona, New Mexico, into central Texas and northern Mexico, from 2,000 to 6,000'
- grows to 6' tall, 8' wide; inconspicuous cream colored blooms in spring, followed by red fruit; winter deciduous
- plant in full sun to light shade, tolerant of variable, well-drained soils
- tart berries used to make a refreshing beverage, berries can be dried and stored; seeds contain was-like oil that burns well; leaves used for dye; fruit eaten by wildlife

***Salvia clevelandii*** - Chaparral Sage, Cleveland Sage

Lamiaceae - Mint family

- native to southwest California on low elevation hillsides
- grows to 4' tall, 6-8' wide; has violet-purple blooms from spring into early summer, with strongly aromatic foliage

- plant in full or lightly filtered sun, with *well-drained* soil (*do not overwater in summer* when it is resting!)
- can be used as substitute for culinary sage (has strong flavor, so use sparingly); bloom stems and leaves dry well and remain fragrant for dried arrangements and potpourri; hummingbirds can't resist flowers

***Simmondsia chinensis*** - Jojoba

Simmondsiaceae - Simmondsia family

- native to dry gravelly hillsides and washes in southern California, Arizona and Baja California and mainland Mexico from 1,500 to 5,000'
- grows 6-8' tall and wide; male and female plants, both with yellowish-green inconspicuous flowers
- grow in full sun with well-drained soil
- the nut-like fruits can be eaten fresh or dried, have been roasted and used as a coffee substitute; oil-like wax used in cosmetics, lotions and shampoos, and as a machine oil; used for pulmonary problems, anti-inflammatory for mucous membranes, also used for colitis, ulcers, hemorrhoids and sore throats; fruit eaten by wildlife

***Tecoma stans*** - Yellow Bells, Tronadora

Bignoniaceae - Bignonia family

- native to rocky slopes and gravelly plains from 2,000 to 5,500', from southeastern Arizona to western Texas and Mexico
- grows 8-12' tall, 6-8' wide; bright yellow flowers appear throughout warm season
- grow in well-drained soil in full sun; frost sensitive, but regrowth is quick in spring
- used to alleviate diabetes; as diuretic, and for intestinal parasites, and to treat colds, kidney and liver diseases; hummingbirds love the flowers

**Herbal Perennials**

***Artemisia ludoviciana*** - Western Mugwort, Estafiate, Prairie Sagebrush

Asteraceae - Sunflower family

- native to dry slopes, canyons and plains throughout western U. S. and into Mexico (cultivated in England to produce 'Silver King' and 'Silver Queen')
- grows to 3' tall, spreads laterally by rhizomes (needs annual control if you don't want it to spread); has inconspicuous yellowish-green flowers from July to October
- plant in full sun in moderately- to well-draining soil; very cold hardy
- plant has been used for hundreds of years for stomach pains, diarrhea, coughs and rheumatism; can be used with meats, but use sparingly; dries well for arrangements; good for butterflies

***Monarda fistulosa*** - Bee-balm, Wild Bergamot

Lamiaceae - Mint family

- found throughout most regions in N. America into Mexico, at higher elevations in Arizona and New Mexico
- grows 2-3' tall and wide, spreads by underground rhizomes; has tubular rosy-purple flowers from mid to late spring
- perennial, plant seed in fall in sunny location (with some summer shade)
- flowers and leaves used for tea, leaves used to season meats, stews, soups; also used medicinally for bronchial problems and as digestive aid; attracts pollinator bees, butterflies and hummers

***Salvia greggii*** - Autumn Sage, Texas Red Sage

Lamiaceae - Mint family

- native to rocky hillsides of central, western, and southern Texas, into northern Mexico, at elevations of 2,000 to 8,000'
- reaches 2-3' tall and 3' wide; has tubular red flowers in loose spikes, with heaviest blooms in spring and fall, and less profuse in summer
- grow in filtered sun or afternoon shade
- the foliage has a somewhat minty scent, and mild oregano flavor for cooking; flowers attract hummingbirds

***Tagetes lucida*** – Mexican-tarragon, Mexican-mint Marigold, Yerba Anis

Asteraceae - Sunflower family

- native to Mexico
- grows 1½-2' tall, 1-2' wide; has small golden yellow flowers in fall
- grow in full sun or filtered sunlight; dies back to ground in winter
- leaves and flowers make a delicious hot or cold tea; aids digestion and colds, used as an antiseptic external wash; use to flavor vinegars, chicken, etc.; flowers attract butterflies

## **Herbal Annuals**

***Amaranthus cruentus*** - Hopi Red Dye Amaranth

Amaranthaceae - Amaranth family

- grows to 6' tall and 2-3' wide; has foot-long maroon inflorescence in summer
- grow in full sun, plant seed in spring or early summer
- used by Hopis to make a scarlet natural food dye for piki bread; tiny black seed are edible; young plants and young leaves are eaten as greens or can be steamed

***Chenopodium ambrosioides*** - Epazote, Mexican-tea

Chenopodiaceae - Goosefoot family

- native to Mexico and Central America in open areas
- grows 2-4' tall, 3' wide; with inconspicuous yellow-green flowers that produce copious amounts of seed
- grow in full or filtered sun; a warm season annual (plant seed in spring), or perennial if protected from frost
- used in bean dishes for flavoring and to reduce flatulence; tea used to get rid of intestinal parasites and for menstrual problems

***Hyptis suaveolens*** - Summer Chia, Guarijio Conivari

Lamiaceae - Mint family

- native to Mexico
- grows 4-5' tall and wide; has large minty-oregano smelling leaves and small white flowers in summer
- this warm season annual is fast growing in full sun in variable soils (plant seed in spring)
- hundreds of seeds are produced by each plant - makes a refreshing beverage with high fiber mucilage; leaves can be used to make a minty tea; used by Mayo Indians as an eye remedy and to control diarrhea

***Monarda citriodora*** – Lemon-mint, Lemon Bee Balm

Lamiaceae - Mint family

- native to Texas and southeast New Mexico, into the Plains states
- grows 2-3' tall and 1-2' wide; has tubular pinkish-lavender flowers from March or April to June
- cool season annual, plant seed in fall (October) in sunny location
- flowers and leaves can be used for tea, in salads; attracts butterflies and hummers

***Salvia columbariae*** - Desert Chia

Lamiaceae - Mint family

- native to sandy washes and hillsides in California, Arizona and Mexico, below 4,000'
- stems grow ½-1' tall; native wildflower has whorls of purple flowers in spring
- this cool season annual grows in full sun, plant seed in October or November; self seeds
- the protein and oil rich seed has had many uses: ground with flour to make a biscuit-like bread; used to make pinole and atole, and a soothing mucilaginous drink; makes a mucilaginous poultice; was formally used to make chia pets; currently used as a thickener in sauces and salad dressing

***Verbesina encelioides*** - Golden Crownbeard, Añil del Muerto

Asteraceae - Sunflower family

- native to gravelly and poor soils on hillsides and washes throughout southwest (as well as most of U.S. and Mexico), from 3,000 to 7,000'
- grows 2-3' tall; with bright golden daisy-like flowers and pretty silvery-green foliage that has a foetid odor (hence the Spanish name "Sunflower of the Dead")
- grow in full sun, plant seed in spring; a fast growing summer annual
- used for treating spider bites, boils, skin diseases and hemorrhoids; also for gastrointestinal disorders; flowers attract butterflies

**Herbal Groundcovers & Vines**

***Anemopsis californica*** - Yerba Mansa, Yerba del Manso

Saururaceae - Lizard-tail family

- native to wet, alkaline soil of drainages and washes from 2,000 to 5,500' in California and southern Utah to western Texas and south into Mexico
- grows 1-2' tall, spreads by stolons (strawberry-like); blooms from April to August/September with conical spikes of white flowers above large white or pinkish-white bracts, leathery leaves turn red in fall, die back in cold
- grow in moist soil in shade, filtered sunlight or full sun
- roots and leaves used as a wash or salve to treat sores, bruises, and arthritis, with anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, anti-fungal and astringent properties; used for coughs, urinary and digestive problems

***Clematis drummondii*** - Old Man's Beard, Virgin's Bower

Ranunculaceae - Crowfoot family

- native to washes and rocky canyons below 4,000', in southern Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, into Mexico
- vine grows 20-30', often climbing over shrubs and trees; with pale yellow-green flowers spring through summer, which form attractive plumed seed heads; winter deciduous
- grow in fairly well-drained soil, in full sun or partial shade; needs support to climb
- used to help heal sores

***Passiflora arida*** - Baja Passionflower

Passifloraceae - Passionflower family

- native to southern Arizona, Texas, through most of Mexico extending into South America, along washes into thickets
- vine growing 15-20', often clambering over shrubs into tress; lavender and white flowers open at night and whither by early morning, from May into November
- grow in well-drained soil with some organic top mulch, somewhat drought tolerant, but can tolerate most soil conditions, in full sun or partial sun; tender perennial that reseeds easily
- fruits produced are relatively small but very tasty; larval food plant for gulf fritillary butterflies

***Passiflora mexicana*** - Mexican Passionflower

Passifloraceae - Passionflower family

- native to washes or along streams (sometimes dry mesas) from 2,500 to 5,000' from southern Arizona into northern and central Mexico
- vine growing 15-20', often climbing over shrubs and trees; with pink to rosy-lavender flowers spring through fall; evergreen
- grow in well-drained soil with some organic amendment, in full sun or partial sun; produces tendrils to climb
- used medicinally as sedative and to promote sleep, to lower blood pressure, and as antispasmodic for cramps, diarrhea and morning sickness; larval food plant for gulf fritillary butterflies

## **Herbal Succulents & Accents**

***Agave* spp. (*A. chrysantha*, *A. murpheyi*, etc.)**

***Agave deserti*** - Desert Agave, Amul

Asparagaceae - family

- native to hot gravelly (granite) slopes of southeastern CA and southwest AZ, Baja California and northwest Mexico, between 1,000 and 4,000'
- grows to 2' tall, 2½' wide; with yellow flowers; usually produces numerous offsets
- plant in full or filtered sunlight
- all parts of the plant were eaten by Native Americans; used the leaves as fiber, and the juice for medicinal properties

***Bursera microphylla*** - Elephant Tree

Burseraceae - Torchwood family

- native to Baja California and Sonora south to Zacatecas, Mexico, into southern Arizona and California, on south facing rocky slopes and flats below 2,500' elevation
- grows 6-12' tall and wide in our area; usually has inconspicuous blooms in July and August, followed by a small fruit
- grow in a warm, sunny location, protected from frost, with well-drained soil
- stems, leaves, and bark used medicinally, both internally and externally, by Natives; resin used in ceremonies as incense

***Cylindropuntia* spp. (*C. arbuscula*, *C. versicolor*, *C. spinosior*)** - Chollas

***Cylindropuntia acanthocarpa*** - Buckhorn Cholla

Cactaceae - Cactus family

- native to flats and slopes in Arizona and California, south into northern Mexico
- grows 3-6' tall and spreads 4-7' wide with a shrubby form; flowers vary from bright yellow to brick-red April into May

- grow in full sun, with well-drained soil
- buds are harvested from plants, roasted or boiled, provide high amounts of calcium and moderate iron, lower blood sugar after eating; some other species provide fleshy fruits for eating also; flowers visited by native bees

***Euphorbia antisyphilitica*** - Candelilla

Euphorbiaceae - Spurge family

- native to rocky slopes, hillsides and ridges, usually on limestone, from southwestern Texas to Querétaro and Hidalgo, Mexico at elevations of 100 to 3,800'
- grows 1-2' tall and spreads 2-3' over time by underground rhizomes; tiny white flowers turn deep pink on upper stems spring again in summer with rains
- best in full sun or light shade, in well-drained soil; tiny leaves are drought deciduous
- historically used as a medicinal for syphilis; wax substance was removed from stems

***Opuntia engelmannii*** - Engelmann Prickly-pear

Cactaceae - Cactus family

- various species native throughout southwest in dry, well draining soils
- grows to 4' tall 6-8' wide; bright yellow flowers spring to early summer followed by oval red fruits
- grow in well-drained soil, in full sun
- flesh inside pads used to heal cuts and abrasions; used to treat diabetes and urinary problems; young pads are eaten, and fruits are tasty; fruit used as dye; flowers attracts native bees

***Peniocereus greggii*** - Arizona Queen of the Night

Cactaceae - Cactus family

- native to desert areas of Arizona
- grows 2-5' tall; fragrant trumpet-shaped flowers open at night in late June or early July
- grow in filtered sunlight, under cover of open shrub or tree
- tuber and stem used medicinally (slows and strengthens heartbeat, used for palpitations); tuber was used as food; flowers are extremely fragrant, used in perfumery; fruit is food for wildlife

***Yucca spp.*** - Yuccas

***Y. baccata*, *Y. elata*** - Banana Yucca, Soap tree Yucca

Asparagaceae - family

- various species native to grasslands and dry rocky slopes below 7,000' in the southwest
- grow from 6-15' tall, depending on species; have greenish-white flowers in spring
- grow in well-drained soil in full sun
- flowers, and fruits of some, used for food; leaves for fiber and basketry, roots for soap and shampoo, also for joint inflammation

## Southwest Native Herbs Reference List

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David Yetman  
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#### **Food Plants of the Sonoran Desert**

Wendy C. Hodgson  
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#### **Gathering the Desert**

Gary Paul Nabhan  
The University of Arizona Press

#### **Native Plants for Southwestern Landscapes**

Judy Mielke  
University of Texas Press

### CATALOGS

#### Native Seeds/SEARCH

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